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ABSTRACT

This speech discusses strategies for closing the gap between teachers, principals, and central office personnel. These strategies include (1) developing an open climate of mutual understanding and acceptance by devoting special attention to interpersonal relationships, (2) developing a plan to improve staff morale, (3) devising a communication program that keeps the staff informed, (4) sharing the decisionmaking act, (5) accepting negotiations as a fact of life and utilizing the process to improve the educational program, and (6) negotiating in good faith. (Author/JF)

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CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN TEACHERS, PRINCIPALS, AND CENTRAL OFFICE

by Anna Rockhill

Is there a gap between teachers, principals, and central office? Obviously one can't close a gap if a gap doesn't exist. There is an inherent assumption in the title.

Webster defines gap as a break, a breach, a separation or a divergence. He defines a divergence as a separation of two paths as they proceed from a common point.

Central office, as I use it, refers to the chief school officer of a school district, the superintendent. In doing this I am taking the same liberty as Humpty Dumpty did when he said to Alice, "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."[1]

There is evidence that there is a gap between teachers, principals, and the central office. This is to be expected because of the different perspective of the parties involved. Teachers work directly with children; principals work with teachers and secondarily with children, and superintendents work with other central office personnel, principals, occasionally with teachers, and rarely with students. Teachers are primarily concerned with the children they teach, principals with their schools, and superintendents with total school districts. Since each has a unique primary concern, it is natural that there is a difference in perspective.

In addition, the relationship between each is a source of potential conflict. The principal supervises and evaluates; the teacher is supervised and evaluated, and the superintendent is the overall evaluator of both the principal and the teachers.

A difference in attitude is bound to exist between the supervised and the supervisor. There is seldom an employee, no matter what position he holds who is completely satisfied with the efforts and functioning ability of his immediate superior. A certain amount of dissatisfaction is to be expected and may even be

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[1]Carroll, Lewis. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. New York: MacMillan Co., 1956.

beneficial for it may serve to keep the supervisor on his toes.

Another reason for potential conflict is that teachers, principals, and superintendents are individuals and each has his own feelings, aspirations, and perceptions.

There is an ancient Fable that tells of two frogs who had eyes in the back of their heads. Each lived in a valley on opposite sides of a mountain. One day, curious to see more of the world, the frogs climbed up their respective sides of the mountain. Once at the top they met and talked about various things as they examined the valley before their eyes. Then they returned to their respective valleys, convinced that all the valleys outside their own were identical. Each had seen with his own eyes that it was so. The physical impairment of the two frogs prevented each from realizing that he was merely looking back into his own valley.

Like the frogs in the fable, teachers and administrators sometimes take separate viewpoints as seen from their respective sides of an issue. Each sees the same from a different viewpoint. What one sees as obvious, the other cannot see at all. Each, though seeing only part of the picture, feels he sees the whole and each is convinced that his viewpoint is fair and logical.

Sometimes the difference is minimal; at other times it is extreme. Judging from the news media, the differences are increasing. As Will Rogers once said, "Things ain't what they used to be and probably never was." The current variance in outlook is an aggravated phenomenon of our times and it divides in such a way that we were never separated before.

Teachers today are better educated than their predecessors and are more confident of their professional competencies. They have higher expectations and resent assignments to non-teaching tasks. They want to be considered equal partners with those in authority and are, in fact, questioning anyone's authority. They are turning to professional associations and unions for support. They have cast away their ties with administrators, have become independent vocal groups,

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and are getting more recognition than ever before.

As teachers exercise their right to negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment, relationships between the central office, principals, and teachers have deteriorated in varying degrees ranging from small irritating conflicts to real clashes erupting in sanctions and the withholding of services.

A power shift has occurred in teacher-principal relationships. As teachers negotiate directly with top school officials, principals find themselves on the sidelines hoping they can survive the agreements. Often they find they have to implement contracts which usurp their authority. In many cases, the principals find their only chance of survival is to organize so that they, too, can protect their interests and rights by negotiating the terms and conditions of their employment.

The problem is not the fact that there is a gap, but rather that the gap is becoming more pronounced. Many administrators have severed ties with teacher associations. There are a number of reasons for this; the most discernable being an actual or perceived rejection by the teacher membership and a conflict of interest felt by both parties.

As differences increase, the cooperation for the attainment of district goals diminishes. Therefore, it is urgent that the situation be evaluated objectively and that a plan of action be devised to work for common goals in spite of the differences.

The superintendent of schools is the one who is responsible for the total school program. He is responsible for promoting communication and understanding between those who administer and those who teach. It is the superintendent who establishes an atmosphere which facilitates unity of purpose for the attainment of district goals. It is his responsibility to maintain contact with the teachers and the building principals so that both perceive him as an understanding and humane person rather than the unbending representative of the Board of Education. There is a need for him to devise ways of demonstrating his

accessibility and ways to express his interest in maintaining open relationships.

The increase in school size with the accompanying increase in staff and staff demands, community and parent expectations, school-board pressures, and the never ending struggle for adequate resources, have made the role of the school superintendent so complex that he has little time to work with teachers and principals. Has the position of the chief school administrator become so comprehensive and so complicated, that human relationships seem fairly unimportant to him in contrast to the pressing issues that face him daily?

There is no doubt that a major problem of increased size and specialization is human relations. Because of the limitation of the superintendent's time and because positive human relationships require continual nurturing, he must work with and through some one else who has close daily contact with teachers and who is in a position to serve as a liaison person between the central office and the schools in the district.

The person best equipped to serve as a connecting link between the superintendent and the teachers is the building principal. He is the connecting bond between both parties. The superintendent has no choice; he must work through the building principal. Therefore, he must develop a relationship that ensures cooperative action and loyal support between himself and the building principal. He must keep the principal informed at all times. He must also involve him in district concerns and decisions so that the principal can be supporting of, and loyal to central office decisions.

Parents, teachers, and students develop strong loyalties to their school and their school principal. A strong principal, with his community's support, is a vital asset to the superintendent. The principal, therefore, is central to educational decision making, to the resolution of problems, and to effective communication.

If the building principal has a positive attitude and a sense of loyalty to the school district, he will convey these feelings to his teachers in his

daily behavior. If he is unhappy, negative, and dissatisfied, he will convey these feelings and the teachers will behave accordingly.

Two-way communication is needed between the central office and the individual school. The principal has a responsibility to keep the central office informed and knowledgeable about his school program. He also is responsible for keeping his staff informed and up-to-date regarding central office concerns and actions. Teacher interest and concern in district issues are relatively detached unless they affect them personally. A program is needed to involve teachers in district activities so that they will develop a broader perspective and, thereby, take an active interest in matters beyond the confines of their classrooms and their respective schools.

The principal works through and with his staff and the superintendent. He must be responsive to the perceptions and expectations of both his staff and the chief school officer; both impose their expectations upon him. When these expectations are compatible, the principal works smoothly with both, but when the expectations are in conflict, the principal must resolve this difference while maintaining his integrity and his perspective regarding what is best for the children in his building. Resolution of conflicts between expectations and performance is a frustration which he has to learn to tolerate and use to the best interest of his school program.

The type of human relationships that exist among the members of a school staff affect the morale of that staff. Morale has been defined as a climate of satisfaction arising from good interpersonal relations. It is a feeling among a group of employees that they are progressing toward mutually accepted and worthwhile goals.[1] It is a subjective condition consisting of feelings people have about their work, their fellow-workers, and especially about those who are in leadership positions. It depends a great deal upon whether or not they feel they can influence the decisions that affect them.

Naturally, the feeling is that decisions should be made in one's favor. We

[1]Gellerman, Saul W. Motivation and Productivity. New York City: American Management Association, 1963.

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all know that this cannot always be, for as goals and expectations are met, new goals and expectations arise. Wanting something more is a normal and healthy human trait which is frustrating for those in management positions, but which makes progress possible. Even more than expecting decisions to be favorable, is an expectation by employees that management be honest and straightforward with them. Nothing is as detrimental to staff morale as broken promises. Once an expectation is shattered, it causes all other expectations to be suspect.

Studies concerning morale in industry show that the effectiveness of an organization is largely determined by the quality of the relationships existing among the people functioning within the organization's structure. The relationship with one's immediate superior is most significant in determining one's attitude toward his work situation. The quality of the relationship existing between the principal and the superintendent, and between the teachers and the principal, affects the morale of the principal and the teachers respectively.

Staff morale is proportional to individual needs-satisfaction. There is a positive relationship between the satisfactions felt by the leader of a group and the general effectiveness of those he is leading. Those best able to lead others toward needs-satisfaction tend to be those who are fulfilling their own needs. In other words, a principal who is experiencing a feeling of security and job satisfaction is more likely to emanate these attitudes to his staff than one who is insecure and dissatisfied.

It should be remembered that behavior is more often psychological than logical. People tend to behave in terms of their attitudes and their perceptions of the situation rather than the actual situation. Each person brings his own background, experience, and perceptions to a situation and reacts accordingly. Crawford states that,

"Men do things because of pride, greed, fear, vengeance, hate, self-respect, generosity, integrity, justice, love. Every man can be lazy, antagonistic, harsh, scheming, industrious, cooperative, understanding, loyal.

Climate helps to determine which emotions shall control. Every man has the potentiality for being something of the hero or something of the villain."[1]

Basic to positive human relationships and teacher morale is communication. There is no doubt that the gap between teachers, principals, and central office is widening because of ineffective communication. Wrong perceptions abound in many school systems because of inadequate and inaccurate information.

Communication is the process whereby one person, the sender, makes his ideas and feelings known to another, the receiver. Communication is achieved when the receiver has received the message and integrated it well enough to act upon it.

Conveying a message in either written or oral form does not insure communication. In fact, the greatest deterrent to communication is the illusion that it has been achieved for the sender then terminates his efforts to communicate.

The attitude of the sender and the receptability of the receiver plus his attitude, determine the degree of communication which takes place. It is a two-way process; the receiver must want to understand as well as the sender want to send. Both must be tuned in on the same wave length and have the same word associations. Word meanings are derived from the speaker's and the listener's experiences and background even more than they are from dictionary definitions. A story highlighting this fact states that "A teacher sent a note home with Johnny's report card saying, "Johnny is not contributing." The next day Johnny came to school with a scrawly note which read, "We don't have much money, but here's a nickel."

We depend upon communication when working with others. It is the primary means of influencing them and motivating action. Therefore, it is vital that programs be planned to improve communication. When communicating, a real effort should be made to:

[1]Crawford, F C. How to Increase Executive Effectiveness. p.3 Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1953.

1 - Establish a climate of mutual trust. The environment should be devoid of threat so that people will express themselves willingly and honestly.

2 - Set the stage for the message so that the receiver has the necessary background for a common reference point.

3 - Make the message simple and clear so that it requires the least possible effort on the part of the receiver.

4 - Select the mode of communication carefully. Face-to-face communication is most effective because the sender can be sensitive to the receiver's receptability and can adjust his message accordingly.

5 - Be aware of nonverbal behavior. It has been said that man communicates with his entire body and all his behavior. One's actions, facial expressions, voice tone, and attitude affect the message even more than the words used.

6 - Listen to the receiver's comments and observe his behavior. His behavior as well as his words will provide valuable clues for the sender.

In conclusion, the gap between teachers, principals, and central office will close when superintendents, principals, and teachers all work together and:

1 - Develop an open climate of mutual understanding and acceptance by devoting special care and attention to interpersonal relationships.

2 - Develop a plan to improve staff morale. Teachers and principals should be included in the planning for morale is related to participation in planning and formulating policies.[1]

[1]Chase, Francis S. "Factors for Action Satisfaction in Teaching". Phi Delta Kappan 33: 127-32; 1951.

3 - Devise a communication program that keeps the staff informed. This is especially important during the negotiating period. If members of a staff are to consider alternate considerations and proposals, they must have adequate information so that they can make intelligent decisions.

4 - Share the decision-making act. Look for meaningful ways to make cooperative decisions involving teachers, principals, and other personnel. Research shows that teacher satisfaction is directly related to the extent to which teachers participate in decision making.[2]

5 - Accept negotiations as a fact of life and utilize the process to improve the educational program.

6 - Negotiate in good faith. Both teachers and administrators have a responsibility to reach workable agreements within a reasonable amount of time.

Finally, strategies must be devised to close the gap. Never has such a high quality and wide range of human resources been available. Surely, we should be able to work together and use the resources to improve education.

As Emerson said, "This time of all time is a good one if we but know what to do with it." I am hoping that we will soon find some way of utilizing the knowledge we have to deepen our insights so that we can work together for our mutual interest - the children - for work together we must if education is to be effective.

[2]Bidwell, Charles E. "The Administrative Role and Satisfaction in Teaching?". J. Ed. Sociology 29: 41-47; 1955.